Death is the Wages of Sin: Murder and the True Crime Musical

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According to the *Associated Content*, "true crime is the fastest growing genre since the turn of the century," with television series, films, and books amassing large fan followings (Gregoriou: 10). Audiences are obsessed with true crime content; recent hits such as Netflix's *Making a Murderer* (2015), American Crime Story's *The People v. O.J.* (2016), and the popular podcast, *Serial* (2014) have all pointed to the genre's rise in popularity over the past few years. In fact, a recent *Bustle* article even named 2016 the "year of true crime" (Sorren). True crime remains a popular genre for books, television, and film; yet, it seems that theatre has been slow to utilize true crime in its storytelling. Although staged violence is nothing new, Broadway musicals' multi-million dollar budgets and correspondingly expensive ticket prices often force producers to "play it safe" by creating content that will appeal to the widest audience base. As arguably the most commercial and market-driven theatrical venture, Broadway musicals are frequently family friendly and uplifting. As John Bush Jones states in *Our Musicals, Ourselves,* audiences have historically wanted musicals that are "feel-good . . . shows with a conventional narrative storyline and some hummable tunes" (Jones: 268). True crime's intent, however, is not to allow readers and spectators to "feel good" about themselves; often, the goal is to convey motive so that the consumer of the genre can understand the reasons behind a criminal's behavior. These genres seem to be at odds, but there are musicals whose narratives and staging echo those found within true crime stories.

Fans of Broadway musicals have certain expectations that they hope productions will fulfill, and spectators can leave the theatre feeling disappointed when those expectations go unfulfilled. This conflict

can be understood through Hans Robert Jauss's theory of "horizon of expectations," which is understood to be the set of expectations a person holds based on the established rules, conventions, and traditions of a particular type of work. The further the work deviates from these expectations, the more likely the consumer will feel alienated or disappointed (Griswold: 87). On the question of expectations, theatre historian Marvin Carlson states, "Generic expectations and relationships to other works (intertextuality) are clearly as relevant to theater reception as to reading, and juxtaposition of fiction and reality is perhaps even more relevant, given the particularly central role played by mimesis and iconicity in the theater" (12). When fans of Broadway musicals see shows that do not fulfill their expectations of what a Broadway musical should be, they feel frustrated. One way to combat this kind of audience response is by shifting the horizon of expectations through the creation of subgenres that follow slightly deviated conventions. Musical theatre scholar Larry Stempel suggests subgenres construct "the rules of the game, so to speak—by which creators create, performers perform, and audiences come to know what to expect" (4). Subgenres alter the way producers and consumers think about media. Although *American Idiot* (2009), *All Shook Up* (2004), and *Company* (1970) are all musicals, it can be helpful to understand them under more targeted genre names, such as "rock musical," "jukebox musical," and "concept musical," respectively. Additional musical theatre subgenres include "megamusical" and "revue musical;" yet, musicals that tackle violence that is rooted in true crime stories do not fall under a unified subgenre. As developments in musical theatre shift the genre's focus towards darker material, it seems prudent to consider additional subgenres that reveal connections among musicals that do not neatly fit into existing categories. By analyzing how musical writers engage with violence and criminal motive, this study seeks to categorize a new subgenre of musical theatre called the *true crime musical*.

The concept of combining true crime and musical theatre is not new; the elements that are constitutive of these genres already exist on theatrical stages, although no producer or critic has labeled them in this manner. Just as the "jukebox musical" and the "rock musical" have

become popular subgenres of musical theatre, so too might the true crime musical become as instantly recognizable. In the same manner that other subgenres of musical theatre legitimize the works that fall under those categories, this essay attests that carving out a subgenre for true crime performance works is a step towards diversifying the types of musicals offered on commercial stages. Composers and lyricists may become emboldened to write new content inspired by the existence of the subgenre, and producers may consider marketing their productions to fans of true crime. Fans of true crime and musical theatre share an interest in the "escapist nature" that both genres provide; by combining them, this subgenre could appeal to a wide array of spectators (Everett: 100, Battaglio).

True crime and musical theatre share one additional crucial element: their demographic. Both count women among their most loyal consumers. Investigation Discovery, a cable channel that plays true crime media non-stop, is the most watched channel for the "women 25-to-54 age group," according to Nielsen ratings, and female consumers make up 70% of the fans for the true crime podcast, *Sword and Scale* (Battaglio, Weller). The Broadway League reported that over the past 2016-2017 season, 66% of its audience were women, with the average theatergoer being 41.7 years old (Broadway League). Producers have thus far ignored this crossover demographic. If these two genres are combined, might they offer a new type of media that would be popular among a key demographic?

The true crime musical shares many of the same features that make its literary counterpart popular. Some of these include: encouraging readers to sympathize with criminal protagonists, presenting violence with detailed grotesquerie or through psychological literary effects, and fictionalizing motive.[1] The true crime musical also borrows from musical theatre, frequently utilizing common conventions, such as placing its lead characters in a romantic relationship. This essay interrogates the use of true crime literary and filmic devices in musicals in an effort to reveal the true crime subgenre already operating on musical stages. This essay begins with an examination of the "crime porn" exhibited by Frank Wildhorn, Don Black, and Ivan Menchell's

Broadway box office failure *Bonnie and Clyde* (2011; hereafter referred to with Wildhorn as primary creative author). A dramatization of the famous romantic duo that robbed banks and killed when necessary during the Great Depression between the years of 1932 and 1934, *Bonnie and Clyde* embraces conventional true crime grotesquerie, such as bloodied bodies and autopsy imagery, while also subverting the common musical theatre narrative of the personal dream. Secondly, this essay looks to Stephen Dolginoff's off-Broadway hit *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story* (2005), which dramatizes the famous 1924 kidnap-murder of Bobby Franks. The musical is an intimate and psychological look into an abusive relationship that creates tension through the absence of visual body horror. While these two productions are not an exhaustive list of the entire subgenre, they offer two potential ends of a possible spectrum, in which *Bonnie and Clyde*'s spectacle is a counterpoint to *Thrill Me*'s minimalism.

Frank Wildhorn's *Bonnie & Clyde* has one of the bloodiest opening sequences of any Broadway musical. The musical opens with the sound of a car engine sputtering and revving as lights come up on a projection of a moving road. After a few moments, the drive is disrupted by the sound of gunfire and breaking glass, and the projection ends. From upstage, the audience sees a newly revealed bullet-ridden and shattered life-size car. Within the car are the blood-splattered bodies of Bonnie and Clyde.[2] The visuals are grotesque, as blood stains the vehicle's upholstery and the rear windshield is covered in blood. This tableau of death, featuring the infamous "Death Car," provides the context with which the audience views the rest of the musical.[3] Not only does the barrage of light, sound, and violent imagery provide a sensory overload for spectators, but also as a relatively long two-minute sequence, the scene effectively sets the tone for the rest of the musical.[4] This sequence borrows the popular true crime narrative convention of framing the story with its conclusion, in this case, the deaths of its protagonists. In *Bonnie and Clyde,* the title characters are gunned down in the opening minutes, and by the show's end, they drive off to what the audience knows will be their deaths. By framing the musical in this manner, Wildhorn ostensibly links his musical to the true crime

genre, and through this same savage imagery, he distances it from other musicals whose violence steers clear from realistic effects.

Although violence features heavily in true crime, one of the most important aspects of the genre is to present the criminal protagonist as sympathetic; if the reader cannot sympathize or understand the protagonist's actions, they will be less engaged in the narrative.[5] One way true crime connects readers to its protagonists is to present them first as "innocent" children, seemingly before they turned to crime and murder. In *Bonnie and Clyde,* during the opening Death Car sequence, young versions of Bonnie and Clyde enter the stage singing about their dreams. For Bonnie, it is to become a movie star just like Clara Bow, while Clyde wants the life of an outlaw just like Billy the Kid. These songs fulfill audience expectations of musical theatre by using the common "I Want" song type. Common "I Want" songs in musical theatre include "The Wizard and I" in *Wicked* (2003), "You and Me (But Mostly Me)" from *Book of Mormon* (2011), and "Gimme Gimme" from *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2000). These songs inform the audience of what the character wants, whether it is fame, fortune, or romance, for example.[6] By incorporating the "I Want" song early in the musical, Wildhorn places *Bonnie and Clyde* firmly within the popular conventions of Broadway musicals. Strikingly, however, the child versions of Bonnie and Clyde sing while the corpses of their future selves remain just upstage of them—perhaps literally "upstaging" them. The sequence is a combination of true crime and musical theatre narrative tactics.

True crime also incites sympathy for its characters by revealing their motives to be the direct result of traumatic experiences. Prior to meeting Bonnie, Clyde is incarcerated for petty theft. During his imprisonment, the guards beat him frequently—the bruises, cuts, and blood visible on his face—and a fellow inmate repeatedly rapes him. Although the rapes occur offstage, they are a significant reason for why Clyde initially turns to violence. Although Clyde first considers inciting a prison guard to kill him, preferring death to his prison life, he eventually decides to end his torment by killing his rapist. In "Raise a Little Hell," he says, "He'll see me but it's the last time . . . No way

out I gotta do this . . . Never killed but now I have to" (Menchell: 64). Clyde then takes a pipe from a hidden floorboard. Turning upstage, Clyde hits a wooden beam repeatedly as a projection of a newspaper headline reads "Eastham Inmate Beaten To Death. No suspect" (Menchell: 64). The musical de-escalates the murder by turning it into self-defense and by staging it symbolically rather than realistically. The symbolic staging of Clyde's murder of his fellow inmate stands in stark contrast to his own bloodied body the audience saw at the beginning of the show. By staging the violence perpetuated against Clyde as more realistic than the violence he commits against others, the musical makes it appear that Clyde's violence is more benign. This serves to justify Clyde's first murder.

Although Bonnie and Clyde are responsible for several deaths, the musical rarely acknowledges them. When they kill people—typically police officers—the victims do not remain onstage after they are shot. In Director Jeff Calhoun's original staging, victims were shot, and a blackout or scenic shift quickly followed, thereby reducing any potential impact the victims' bodies may have had on audience perception. In the Death Car sequence, Bonnie's and Clyde's bodies remained onstage for two minutes, but these other incidental deaths happen so quickly that audiences are encouraged to move on. This serves to make the violence perpetuated against the lead characters worse than the violence they commit against others. The posse members that eventually follow through with killing them, for example, speak at length about how they plan to do so, showing little remorse or respect for their lives. Lines such as, "I want to walk down Main Street with Clyde Barrow's head on a stick" and "Just get me within three hundred yards of him and I'll put a bullet through his neck" are contrasted with the fact that Bonnie and Clyde do not speak of their kills (Menchell: 109). In the scene where the posse is planning to murder Bonnie and Clyde, one sympathetic member, Ted, exclaims, "Since when did we get into the business of murderin' people?" (Menchell: 109). The text frames Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths as murders*;* in doing so, the audience sympathizes with them and not the posse that eventually kills them.

The Death Car sequence also represents a theatrical version of "crime porn," which refers to "visual body horror," such as images of autopsies, gruesome deaths, and blood splatters (Murley: 5). Although the appearance of "crime porn" is not necessary in true crime media, it is common. When victims are the subject of "crime porn," such as murder or autopsy images, it can lead to sympathy for the victim and vilification of the murderer. When criminals are the subject of "crime porn," such as in post-execution images, audiences often feel that all has worked out for the best. As Murley states, a criminal's death instigates a "good old-fashioned reordering of the chaos wrought by crime" (3). In the original Broadway production design, the "crime porn" of the Death Car was accompanied by gruesome projections, such as a video detailing the real aftermath of Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths. The video shows one of the posse members walking to the now-decimated car and opening the passenger door to reveal a deceased Bonnie falling limply out of the car. On the driver's side is Clyde, whose face is marred by the gunshot he took to the head. The video continues as the posse members celebrate Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths. Additional photographs of the real Bonnie and Clyde lying dead on a coroner's slab are projected at certain points within the show. In traditional true crime form, these post-death and autopsy images are supposed to elicit feelings of closure, but that does not align with how audiences are meant to react to similar deaths in musical theatre.

Although "crime porn" is popular in true crime, this convention functions differently onstage. Corpses, for example, "display the loss of a living person," and when death occurs onstage, leaving bodies behind, it "stresses the audience's own proximity to death" (Perdigao: 1-3). This is different from reading about death, seeing static images, or watching it represented on film. Living actors who perform as corpses increase the relative "realness" of the violence through their very real bodies. Violence "that is made to 'look' real and artless draws attention to the body in the space," and can "[hint] at the possibility of 'real' danger, 'real' pain and harm" (Fitzpatrick: 61-62). The blood that soaks the onstage "bodies" also creates a horrific picture that functions differently onstage, as "A realistic use of blood in the theatre can

sometimes be all the more disturbing than in film or television precisely because of the nature of live performance, [and] the physical presence of actors" (Woodworth: 18). The moments in which *Bonnie and Clyde* relies on "crime porn" to convey narrative instigate conflicts between the horizon of expectations for the musical theatre and true crime genres; this can create audience unease. However, audience expectations would shift were the production marketed as a *true crime* musical. Audiences would come to expect the use of violence, blood effects, and disturbing content because producers would label the musical "true crime," which would alter the expectations under which audiences would view the show. While *Bonnie and Clyde* relied on gruesome "crime porn" to convey its narrative, *Thrill Me* stages violence stylistically rather than realistically in order to present a horrific psychological narrative of love, obsession, and murder.

Stephen Dolginoff, who wrote the music, lyrics, and book for *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story,* is a fan of true crime literature, but he is the first to say that his musical is less about a murder than it is about a relationship gone wrong.[7] The musical, whose tag line is "Relationships can be murder," dramatizes the 1924 murder of fourteen-year old Bobby Franks through the perverse and controlling relationship of his killers, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. [8] Dolginoff wrote the musical as an indictment of love that borders on obsession, and through the dominant/submissive dynamic of his two characters, Dolginoff fictionalizes not only their relationship, but also, the motive for the murder. Frequently, in true crime literature, authors will hypothesize possible motives for their stories when they are officially inconclusive (Murley: 131). Often, however, these motives can veer more towards fiction than fact, as the true crime author invents a far more entertaining motive than what likely occurred. In the historical Leopold and Loeb case, the police unearthed a large amount of evidence against the two then-nineteen year olds. Once they were caught, Leopold and Loeb confessed that they killed Bobby Franks because of their obsession with the Nietzschean ideal of "Superman." They had thought committing the perfect crime would be a fun experiment. From their statements, the murder became the "Crime of the

Century," and newspapers dubbed the boys the famous "thrill killers" (Theodore: 148). Dolginoff titles his show "Thrill Me" not only as a reference to this historical nickname, but also to comment on the possibility that Leopold and Loeb were romantically involved. For *Thrill Me,* this relationship serves as the (fictional) motive for the murder.

Originally produced as part of the Fourth Annual Midtown International Theatre Festival at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex in New York City, *Thrill Me* had its official premiere on July 16, 2003. The subsequent Off-Broadway production was produced by The York Theatre Company and opened on May 26, 2005. There have been over 100 productions as of this writing, both in regional American theatres as well as international performance spaces. A Korean-language version has been running in Seoul, Korea continuously since 2007; and likewise, a Japanese translation in Tokyo since 2011. There was also a Greek translation produced in Athens and a German production in Datteln, Germany. The musical also came to the West End for a brief production at the Charing Cross Theatre in 2011. *Thrill Me* productions in Austria, Belgium, Brazil, and Switzerland are forthcoming.[9] Unlike *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Thrill Me* has been a financial success and has amassed a wide fan base because the show did not shy away from the true crime nature of its narrative.

The musical opens on a fifty-four year old Nathan Leopold, who is meeting with the Parole Board of the Joliet Prison. This is Nathan's fifth time before the Board; they have denied him parole previously because of a perceived lack of remorse for the murder he committed when he was nineteen. The musical jumps between 1924 and the parole hearing in 1958. Dolginoff presents Leopold initially as weak and easily controlled by the man he loves—Richard Loeb. Later, Leopold reveals that he purposely left behind the evidence that would eventually implicate them in the murder because he thought they would be able to spend their life imprisonment together.

In the musical, Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold's relationship is a complicated dance of possession and control. From the very first moment Dolginoff introduces Richard Loeb, the stage directions establish him as predatory: "*From behind, darkly handsome Richard Loeb,*

nineteen, enters, slowly approaching like a predator stalking his prey, and purposefully startles him" (Dolginoff 2006: 13). Leopold, attempting to show ownership over Loeb, then puts his hand on his shoulder, but Loeb "pushes" it off (Dolginoff 2006: 14). Dolginoff writes in the stage directions that Leopold is "*like a slave to his master*" (Dolginoff 2006: 16). The relationship is abusive, with Leopold explaining that, prior to the murder, Loeb had "cut off all . . . contact" because he likes to make him "feel like dirt" (Dolginoff 2006: 15). Loeb constantly threatens to cut off his affections if Leopold will not participate in his illicit plans. When Leopold tells him he does not want to set fire to a warehouse, for example, Loeb responds, "Hey, if you don't want to be with me… (*He starts to move away.*)," and when Leopold finally agrees, Loeb rewards him with a "*hard kiss on the lips*" (Dolginoff 2006: 16). Scholars, such as Scott McMillin, Raymond Knapp, and John Bush Jones have all pointed to the musical's reliance on creating romantic narratives between its lead characters, and though the relationship is abusive, Dolginoff places his musical within this romantic convention.

Even though the musical focuses on the controlling, toxic nature of Leopold and Loeb's relationship, the murder is still a vital aspect of the show. By placing the murder offstage and utilizing an invisible victim, *Thrill Me* presents an excellent example of a true crime musical that prioritizes psychological terror over visual "crime porn." In fact, the victim's presence is felt through his absence. In "Roadster," Loeb has a "conversation" with the invisible Bobby:

> Would you like to see my roadster?
> Would you like to look inside?
> It's a shiny, Packard roadster.
> Would you like to take a ride? (Dolginoff 2006: 35)

Dolginoff even provides a moment where Loeb responds to the (unseen) Bobby's dialogue:

> I know—never talk to strangers!
> That's what mothers always warn.
> But I think we could be buddies.
> Sure, I'll let you honk the horn (Dolginoff 2006: 36)

A *Time Out* review of the London production, stated, "The song that hits hardest is 'Roadster' – a disarmingly charming number, used to lure a young boy to his death" (*Time Out* London). Despite his literal absence, Bobby's presence is felt in the show. He is alive and "present" in "Roadster," and the audience is able to imagine him alive; later, the audience imagines his murder. Leopold and Loeb describe various murder methods before they finalize their plan:

> We could chloroform a rag
> And make him breathe the vapors
> Then use it as a gag
> To choke him.
> And once his face is green
> We'll throw him in a bag
> Flee the murder scene
> Then read about it in the papers (Dolginoff 2006: 31)

Thrill Me's use of graphic language is what aligns the musical with the true crime genre, which frequently favors descriptive violent language. True crime books, for example, go beyond telling the reader a murder occurred. Instead, they utilize language to create violent images in the reader's mind. The opening chapters of the popular true crime book, *Helter Skelter,* describe in detail the bodies left behind in the aftermath of the Tate/LaBianca murders:

> She was young, blond, very pregnant. She lay on her left side, directly in front of the couch, her legs tucked up toward her stomach in a fetal position. She wore a flowered bra and matching bikini panties, but the pattern was almost indistinguishable because of the blood, which looked as if it had been smeared over her entire body. A white nylon rope was looped around her neck twice, one end extending over a rafter in the ceiling, the other leading across the floor to still another body . . . (Bugliosi 30).

Although *Thrill Me* lacks a visual representation of Bobby's murder, the language Dolginoff uses crafts a picture of the murder—in much the same way as literary true crime does.

Although the victim's body is unseen, the murder weapons are visible. These include the rope they tie around Bobby's neck to initially

threaten him, the crowbar that Loeb uses to knock him unconscious, and the bottle of acid they use to disfigure him after death. These items act as a synecdoche and are representative of the unseen murder. Stage properties, or "props," act as a "highly visual code" in which the prop item carries with it the weight, severity, and meaning of the real (non-stage) item; this is especially true for stage props that are recognizable as weapons (Hamill: 41). Props often have more visual power onstage than they do in life and can "heighten the spectators' awareness" (Overman-Tsai: 87). Essentially, when audiences see a weapon onstage, they pay attention. Throughout the musical, Dolginoff lures the audience into a false sense that they will never see the victim onstage, but his tangible, if not literally *real*, blood appears when the protagonists are seen carrying bloodied rags after the murder. Although there is no explicitly staged violence in the musical, *Thrill Me* utilizes suggestive and textual "crime porn" to great effect. Both *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Thrill Me*, then, exhibit two distinct versions of "crime porn," one visual and grotesque, the other linguistic and psychological. Taken together, these two musicals demonstrate the ways in which "crime porn" might function within a true crime musical subgenre.

Thrill Me and *Bonnie and Clyde* are two versions of a true crime musical. Many other recent musicals also fit within this category, including three musicals about Lizzie Borden, but thus far, musicals that incorporate true crime storytelling have had little success on commercial stages (2007; 2014; 2017).[10] *Thrill Me*'s global success demonstrates that these types of musicals can have cult followings, but they need to be marketed appropriately. *Thrill Me*'s original production used the tagline "Relationships can be murder," and the show's summary detailed that the musical was about the 1924 murder of Bobby Franks. A recent U.K. production marketed *Thrill Me* as a "captivating musical thriller," and the official website for the show foregrounds the musical as a show about "Thrill Killers."[11] In contrast, producers for *Bonnie and Clyde* focused on the show's love plot, the musical's summary highlighting the protagonists as "America's most notorious *lovers*" in a "*sexy* and compelling adventure" (emphasis mine).[12] Both musicals contain a romance plot and violent elements, but *Bonnie and*

Clyde focused on the romance, while *Thrill Me* blended the two (i.e. "Relationships can be murder"). *Bonnie and Clyde*'s marketing did little to prepare potential audiences for seeing explicitly staged crime porn. Even if people knew some of the duo's history, they were likely not expecting the severity with which the production staged violence. To some extent, then, marketing is responsible for shifting the horizon of expectations for audiences. If producers and critics accept the true crime musical as a legitimate subgenre of musical theatre, then marketing will follow. There are musical theatre fans that adore "rock musicals" and "jukebox musicals," specifically attending those performances with expectations of what those subgenres will deliver. Perhaps, labeling musicals as "true crime" will have a similar effect, and fans of the literary or filmic versions will explore what true crime and live theatre have to offer. At minimum, the subgenre provides a new avenue for marketing these works to an audience that might appreciate them.

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1 See Jean Murley's *The Rise of True Crime.*

2 In the Original Broadway Cast, the characters were played by Jeremy Jordan (Clyde) and Laura Osnes (Bonnie).

[3] The "Death Car" became a tourist attraction following Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths. The car was displayed at state fairs for much of the next decade. See Jeff Guin's *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde* for more information about the Death Car as tourist attraction.

[4] I timed the filmed production that is housed at the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape archive. Although it is possible that this length may vary from production to production, with the computerization of Broadway shows, these details typically become consistent.

[5] See Jean Murley's Introduction to *The Rise of True Crime*.

[6] See Stacy Wolf's *Changed for Good* for more examples of how this song type functions in different musicals.

[7] Email interview with Stephen Dolginoff, February 18, 2013.

[8] In the musical, Bobby is twelve, but the real Bobby Franks was murdered at fourteen years old.

[9] Email interview with Stephen Dolginoff, February 18, 2013.

[10] See *Spindle City: The Lizzie Borden Musical* by Katrina Wood; *Lizzie* by Tim Maner and Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer; and *Lizzie Borden* by Christopher McGovern.

[11] See thrillme-uk.com.

[12] See MTI's description of *Bonnie and Clyde.*